

Device saves cost of fax-only line

If your fax machine is hogging its own phone line, consider using a device that lets a phone and fax share a single line.

The device is called SmartMax, and it could pay for itself in just a few months.

SmartMax is essentially a routing device for your phone system. You hook your phone and fax into SmartMax and then it is connected to just one of your phone lines.

By quickly sampling incoming calls, SmartMax can discriminate between voice and fax. If it hears the screeching tone of a fax it directs the call to your fax machine; otherwise, it goes to your phone and continues ringing.

The charm of this arrangement is that one phone line does double duty — thus saving substantial monthly phone bills. As handy as this could be, it's not for everyone. Some businesses will still need to use a dedicated phone line for their fax.

Some of SmartMax's features include:



Hillel Segal

This manual override means you can send a fax to someone while you're talking to them, and then resume your conversation. In the event of a power outage, the mode is automatically changed to phone-only, since a fax can't operate without external power.

■ Works with your answering machine, so the line can be used to receive messages as well. This brings the two most used phone devices together without contention. All you do is plug your answering machine into SmartMax's outgoing

■ Front panel status lights and switches. A rocker switch allows you to change from the automatic switching mode to either phone-only or fax-only. Indicator lights confirm the switch setting.

phone jack, and plug your telephone into the answering machine.

■ Locks out non-fax calls or other use of the line while the fax machine is in use. Thus, if you have a multiline telephone system, users would be prevented from interrupting a fax transmission.

There are some compromises, however, in shared vs. dedicated phone lines. A dedicated fax line is less likely to be tied up for either incoming or outgoing transmissions. You probably won't want to use the device unless the fax is not heavily used.

In my office the fax machine gets light use, but I've been paying for a dedicated line. I've discovered that this is a fairly extravagant arrangement. My monthly fee for a single, no-frills business line is around \$40, and installation of the line was around \$85. With these typical costs in mind, the \$200 SmartMax could be amortized in just a few months.

If you're planning to use SmartMax with just one line, it's a snap

to install. It's just a matter of inserting three modular telephone plugs: your incoming phone line, your regular phone and your fax machine.

On the downside, if you're planning to hook up SmartMax in an office environment with several numbers that "roll over," it gets much trickier.

■ The Bottom Line: SmartMax is a good investment for current fax owners. Prospective fax buyers, however, should look for SmartMax capabilities built into their new machines. I've noticed that many of the latest models for less than \$1,000 now incorporate its features.

SmartMax costs \$199 and is available from MaxTrek, 2000 Powell St., Emeryville, Calif. 94608; (800) 445-4451.

Hillel Segal's weekly column evaluates gadgets, small-computer hardware and software, seminars, and books designed to enhance business productivity.